

Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

Black Summer was the first real test of the climate change driven future and the NSW RFS and other agencies were largely successful in handling this unprecedented season. However this should not obscure the fact that volunteers worked for periods and in conditions well beyond anything that would be normally tolerated.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

The 000 system often delays brigade response by 10 to 20 mins and more. In a system that is literally life and death this is shameful, especially as smartphone based applications can collect much of the information automatically and quickly. This sort of technology has been quickly implemented overseas at low cost. Previous recommendations for changes to this system have not been actioned.

Budgeting restrictions have left the RFS with insufficient and obsolete equipment. Many brigades including ours are still equipped with tankers lacking safety equipment such as thermal window blinds. Our truck has a cranky gearbox, the old mushroom spray, manual hose winders, and two steps up into the cab rather than the powered winders and three steps in the new trucks. While the blinds will occasionally save lives, the others don't sound like a major issue, but when you have a minimal crew of retirees scrambling in and out of the truck and deploying and rewinding the live-reels repeatedly over the course of a 12 hour or longer shift it soon adds up to the physical exhaustion many of us feel when we return home. This truck is scheduled to stay in service until 2031 which I find incomprehensible. Many brigades obviously need more light Cat-9 land cruiser tankers, as the demand for these has been extreme.

The RFS communications systems are built around obsolete pagers which do not allow two way communication and voice only radio. Fire control currently has no idea if a brigade in a rural area will be able to respond for 15 minutes or more. Use of digital communications and smartphone applications would allow both brigades and Fire Control to be kept up to date. This applies to brigade availability, response, mapping and location tracking, fire extent and communication with support services such as water trucks and dozers.

All agencies on the fireground need interoperable equipment. The Forestry Corporation was very active and effective in our area, but their hose fittings and radio were not compatible with the RFS equipment.

Many landholders in rural areas were very unprepared for a bad fire season, never mind the conditions that occurred last year. There is now a willingness to learn and it is important that property protection information and support is available.

Radio communications were overloaded during the larger fires with wait times of 5 minutes and more. I hate to think what would happen to a truck facing an emergency at these times.

Bureaucracy, designed to reduce costs, has limited emergency response. In our rural and mountainous area we were not able to use the local dozer driver who literally knows the area

like the back of his hand because he was not on the approved list. The same does happen with hazard reductions, though the main impediment is the lengthening fire season.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

The “Fires near me” app should be expanded to an “RFS App” allowing for most public interactions with the RFS. This would cover fire weather and alerts, fire reporting, information on local fires, hazard reductions, property protection and local fire groups. A full description is attached.

All RFS tankers should be refreshed or replaced to a minimum level more often than every 25 years.

More Light Cat-9 Tankers should be deployed.

The pager system should be replaced by a smartphone app allowing Fire Control access to brigade availability and responding volunteers as they happen.

All trucks should be equipped with a tablet with navigational and mapping software with visibility of the fire extent and other trucks locations. This could be used to immediately update fire extents.

Radio and firefighting equipment in all agencies should be reviewed so they are interoperable.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

I have attached a description of my proposed "RFS App" and another document with more detail on many of the points I have raised.